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Recognising the complexity of urban governance and leadership is critical for sustainable future cities

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About the research

Urban governance is an increasingly complex and fragmented process. We can no longer think of it as being the (almost) sole preserve of a municipal public sector body, as austerity tightens its grip and local councils increasingly have to withdraw from roles traditionally held. In this new landscape, we see governance – or ‘leadership’ – as the province of multiple actors, from public, private and civil society, coming together to lead the city.

In this context, during Bristol’s year as European Green Capital in 2015, a series of conversations brought together city thinkers – from academia, public and private sectors and civil society – to discuss city futures in general and Bristol’s future in particular, building on issues such as possible devolution agreements, the extent to which citizens are engaged, and questions of how far a city can control its own destiny.

Bristol has a history of working collaboratively across sectors with a forward-looking city council and mayor, flourishing and innovative social and private sectors and energised communities that have all been prepared to try new approaches and take risks. The two universities play an important role, as does the Green Capital Partnership with over 850 members from all sectors. This adaptability and collaboration may be the way forwards to a healthy, resilient, future city, and could be used as a model for other cities.

This research focuses on issues of city leadership and capacity in moving to a sustainable and resilient urban future.

Policy implications

- Public, private and civil society organisations should come together in creative collaborations to manage the city of the future.
- As public sector capacity is being reduced, capacity elsewhere needs to be developed, with social enterprise driving innovation and potentially starting to fill some of the gaps.
- Inequality is at the core of many city problems. Future urban policies should seek to recognise and tackle this.
- Growth should be seen as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Focusing on development rather than growth could help to ensure that the economy helps deliver social, economic and environmental goals.
- Cities need to better recognise the diversity of communities and find ways of constructively engaging and valuing their contributions and potential.

- City governance is not just about public bodies but involves many different actors across the city taking leadership roles.
- The 'anchor institutions' (universities, health providers and major businesses) have a civic responsibility towards their city and significant influence, which can be used for good through their employment, procurement and operational policies, and through other interactions with the city.
- The innovation shown by many enterprises, both SMEs and non-profit initiatives, can complement public body roles for the wider benefit of the city.
- Where grassroots innovation is allowed to flourish, communities can be more resilient and prepared to manage their own futures.
- Using the idea of 'utopias' as a way of thinking allows us to move beyond 'short-termism' and is a creative way of engaging different communities of the city.
- Tackling inequality (of opportunity, resources and representation) resonates with many people and could create a common purpose in moving towards a fairer city. To do so requires developing more broadly shared values and resilient approaches that everyone recognises.
- Sustainable prosperity depends on having forms of development that generate social, economic and environmental benefits.

For more information on the initiative see the Cabot Institute case study page at: <http://bristol.ac.uk/cabot/research/casestudies/2015/delivering-future-city.html>

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